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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KN](#) [KS](#)  
SUBJECT: ROH MOO-HYUN'S TURBULENT TERM: HISTORIANS MAY BE  
KINDER

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) Roh Moo-hyun ends his presidency a deeply disappointed man. According to Blue House contacts, Roh has been moody and morose since the presidential election in December which resulted in a lopsided victory for the conservative candidate Lee Myung-bak. Not helping Roh's mood is the piling on by even his traditional supporters, fingering him for policy missteps, failure to build any consensus around his center-left policies, offensive and divisive public remarks, and placing ideology above the people's welfare, especially their economic well-being. The reality is that most Koreans are enormously relieved to see the end of Roh's tenure; they have been counting the days for some time.

¶2. (C) Roh apparently takes some comfort in comparing himself to figures from the past, especially President Truman, who have been judged with more kindness by historians than contemporaries. He tells his staff that his North Korea policy was fundamentally sound and that it opened a new era of inter-Korean dialogue, a prerequisite for reconciling with the North. He also takes considerable pride in having reduced regionalism, the malignant rivalry between the Southeast and the Southwest, which has traditionally infected all aspects of Korean politics and society. Also of comfort to Roh is that he is likely to be the first president in decades without himself or his sons facing jail for corruption, and he deserves credit for dramatically reducing corruption in election finance. Many of these developments are of course due to the maturing of South Korean politics, but it is also true that Roh's tenure has shown that there is a place in South Korea for center-left government that emphasizes fairness, equality and, above all, mass participation in government and politics. While the policies and ideas he advocated will remain, Roh is likely to disappear from the political scene for now. END SUMMARY.

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REASONS TO BE DISAPPOINTED  
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13. (C) Roh has been remarkably quiet since the crushing defeat of his candidate, Chung Dong-young, in the December 19 presidential election. Chung won just 26.3 percent of the vote compared to 48.7 percent for Lee Myung-bak, the conservative candidate. More telling, candidates opposed to Roh -- Lee Myung-bak and Lee Hoi-chang -- won 63.8 percent, compared to 36.2 percent for progressive and left-wing candidates. According to a senior Blue House official, Roh expected a defeat, but not by such an enormous margin. Over the past two months, Roh has apparently been drinking heavily with close friends and aides, expressing deep disillusionment at the turn of events.

14. (C) Most hurtful for Roh is the blame for the defeat heaped on him even by his former supporters. His party stalwarts are openly lamenting Roh's inept performance, virtually unanimous in tracing Lee Myung-bak's victory to Roh's mishandling of state affairs. Centrist party officials, such as former lawmaker and Roh campaign advisor Chyung Dai-chul, blame Roh for ignoring party politics, hiring incompetent staff, and making frequent public speaking gaffes. Mostly, however, they blame him for implementing leftist policies, especially toward North Korea and on social issues such as education and real estate ownership, that are unacceptable to mainstream South Koreans.

15. (C) On the other hand, Roh's leftist supporters note that Roh turned his back on his core support base when he pushed through the KORUS FTA and sent troops to Iraq. They were also deeply disappointed that Roh's rhetoric was far louder than his action on economic development, especially his failure to do anything about the ever-increasing gap between rich and poor. For some time, even the leftists were tired of Roh's inability to execute "change," criticizing his policies as too ideological and sentimental, and chiding Roh himself for being inflexible and stubborn.

16. (C) Perhaps the most telling sign of widespread public discontent can be seen in the youngest group of voters who were instrumental in voting him in during the chaotic 2002 presidential elections. In a November 2007 survey of Seoul university students, the younger generation expressed the greatest displeasure with Roh's handling of state affairs (only 12.1 percent approved), education policies (14.6 percent), social polarization (16.1 percent), and labor/employment policies (17.5 percent). Professor Kang Won-taek of Soongsil University said, "It may be understandable for a liberal government to increase taxes, but the problem was that the people couldn't feel the benefits in return, since the education and housing prices soared over the past decade." There was no group that stayed loyal to Roh -- even in the traditionally liberal southwest Jeolla region, where liberal candidates typically receive over 90 percent support, Chung Dong-young won only 80 percent.

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TOO EARLY TO BE ANGRY?  
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17. (C) Although numbering only a few, there are still defenders of Roh Moo-hyun. One of them is Park Sun-won, who has been a senior Blue House staffer since the beginning of Roh's term. Granted, Roh has been clumsy and stubborn, Park said, but Roh will be remembered for reducing the power of the government, introducing transparency in government, and providing opportunities to women and other disadvantaged segments of the population. Even Roh's detractors admit that under Roh's presidency, there have been significant gains:

-- A reduction in the power and authority of the Prosecutors' Office, the National Tax Office, and the National Intelligence Service (NIS). Traditionally, these three offices have been the tools of choice for the Blue House to threaten and control its detractors. Victims have ranged from political opponents to newspapers to big business. The consensus view is that abusive practices by these three

offices have declined dramatically under Roh.

-- A reduction in corruption. Along with the diminished roles of the prosecutors, tax officials and NIS, there has been a reduction in corruption. Roh's presidency has been largely free of illegal political funds, corruption and bribery scandals. If Roh is to get into legal trouble, most pundits speculate, it will be because of suspicions that he had a role in covering up for illegal fundraising by the previous president, Kim Dae-jung.

-- A decrease in regionalism. A passionate ideologue, Roh was elected on a center-left policy platform. Roh's continued adherence to progressive policies, especially his founding of the Uri Party, has made South Korean politics based more on policies than regions. Regionalism is still alive and well, but its influence is less pervasive. As noted, Chung Dong-young, for example, received only 80 percent of votes from Jeolla Provinces, compared to 92.9 percent for KDJ in 1997 and 93.2 percent for Roh in 2002.

-- An increase in human rights awareness. Roh's Administration created the Ministry of Gender Equality, which was instrumental in passing anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution laws. Also significant, Roh himself was very much out in front in advocating measures to correct societal imbalances resulting from urbanization and globalization, although he fell short of passing any concrete legislation.

18. (C) On security issues, Roh also chalked up a few gains. While many criticize his North Korea policy, he achieved a summit with Kim Jong-il, opened the Kaesong Industrial Complex, and expanded economic cooperation that even many critics agree helped ease tensions on the Peninsula. Even on U.S.-ROK relations, while Roh was much criticized throughout the election campaign by the conservatives, he was accommodating in relocating the Second Infantry Division and USFK headquarters to Pyeongtaek, dispatching troops to Iraq,

and concluding the KORUS FTA negotiations. The U.S. and Korea also agreed to transfer operational wartime control (OPCON) to the ROK during Roh's tenure, and were able to settle longstanding differences over the environmental standards to be met in the return of military bases and camps.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) Roh's approach to the presidency was a radical departure from the political traditions in South Korea represented by the "Three Kims" (Kim Dae-jung, Kim Young-sam and Kim Jong-pil). Promising an end to "boss" politics, Roh made the presidency approachable. On taking office, Roh had unprecedented public meetings with citizens and even blogged directly on the Blue House web site, arguing his case ranging from why Korea needed educational reform to the evils of Japanese colonial rule. Roh promised that he could fundamentally renovate Korean politics and selflessly push forward with far-reaching political reforms. These were lofty, probably unattainable goals, but made worse by Roh's personal style, which many Koreans found distasteful. Still, these remain goals and policies that attract a large following in Korea. They will now have to find a new champion and, over time, Koreans may well conclude that Roh advanced their goal of establishing the center-left as a force capable of and prepared to hold the reins of government.

VERSHBOW